The Research on Factors Influencing the Success of Visitor Attractions

Changgui Xu\textsuperscript{1,a}

\textsuperscript{1}School of Business Management, Tonghua Normal University, China
\textsuperscript{a}dbcy9999@163.com

Keywords: the organization and its resources, the product, the market, the management of the attraction

Abstract. Every year thousands of individuals and organizations think about developing new visitor attractions. Only a minority of these proposed attractions will ever be built. Most will never be developed for a number of reasons, including funding problems, unfavorable feasibility studies or the lack of a suitable site. Furthermore, many new attractions never take off and either close prematurely or merely survive from year to year. Others achieve early success and then decline due to a lack of investment, visitor management problems or the failure to respond to changes in market demand. Only relatively few attractions achieve constant success over a long period of time. Experience suggests that while nothing guarantees success, there are a number of factors which contribute to the success of visitor attractions.

The organization and its resources

The chances of developing a successful new visitor attraction are greatly enhanced if the organization has experience of developing and managing attractions \textsuperscript{[1-4]}. It will be aware of the opportunities and pitfalls, and will be able to take account of the lessons it has learned from its previous experience. However, the early years of Disneyland Paris show that even experienced, successful attraction operators can make some errors of judgment. An organization with previous experience will also probably have a human resource team that will have the skills and knowledge to develop a new attraction successfully. The most important type of resource, however, and the one which is crucial to successful attraction development, is financial resources. Visitor attractions are very expensive to build and run, and those that are successful tend to be developed by organizations with substantial financial resources. The capital cost of developing attractions varies from less than £1 million for a craft centre or small museum to several billion pounds for a project such as Disneyland Paris. Indeed Disneyland Paris is, together with the Channel Tunnel, probably the largest and most expensive construction project of the age in Europe, and perhaps in the world. As well as the cost of site acquisition and building work, much of the cost comes from fitting out the attraction with expensive museum artifacts or the installation of sophisticated modern technology like lasers and virtual reality experiences. Well-used attractions and those in rapidly changing markets (most of them) also need regular refurbishment, relaunching and remodeling to encourage repeat visits and to keep up with changes in consumer tastes. This is a continuous process that requires investment at frequent intervals. For example, theme parks often believe they need to offer a major new ride every year and these rides often cost over £1 million each.

Attractions also need the financial resources to allow them to provide high-quality facilities and services. Organizations which are short of money often reduce levels of facilities and services and this often leads to a poorer product and, ultimately, fewer visitors. Organizations therefore need to have the resources to maintain standards even in the bad times to ensure the long-term success of the attraction. Attraction operators also need substantial financial resources to allow them to support the attraction in its early years, when it may be losing money, before becoming profitable. In the public sector, of course, many attractions will never be profitable, so the organization will always need to be able to have the financial resources to continue to subsidize the attraction. This is a problem, certainly in Britain, where pressures on public sector spending have often led to reduced subsidies for attractions. All attractions must also have the financial resources to allow them to spend considerable
amounts on marketing to establish and maintain their market position and to respond to problems such as poor seasons. This is important as many small and medium-sized attractions either fail, or do not realize their full potential, because they do not allocate enough resources to marketing.

The product

In recent years, most of the most successful attractions have been those based on a novel approach or a unique idea. This is crucial at a time when the market is highly competitive and consumers are becoming increasingly sophisticated and demanding.

However, simply having a unique idea does not guarantee success. For instance, in the UK the Millennium Dome in London, and the Earth Center environmental theme park in South Yorkshire, were both very novel ideas but the former had major problems and the latter’s future viability is still uncertain. Of course, novel approaches and unique ideas do not stay so for long and, if the attraction is seen to be successful, competitors will soon be copying, adapting and even improving the approaches and ideas. Therefore attractions based on a new idea cannot rest on their laurels, they must always be seeking the next novel approach or unique idea.

Another important factor in relation to the product [5-6] is location. The location of the attraction is very important to its prospects of success in three main ways. First, it determines the catchment area, which is based on how many people live within a certain journey time from the attraction, which can be from thirty minutes to several hours. Second, it is easier for attractions if they are developed in existing tourism destinations as they can benefit from visits by people taking holidays in their catchment area. Finally, although a few major attractions such as Alton Towers flourish in spite of being relatively difficult to travel to, the general consensus is that accessibility is vital to the success of most attractions. As most journeys to attractions are made by private car, road access is crucial, particularly in terms of the motorway network. Good road links effectively expand the attraction’s catchment area, while being just a few miles off major roads can severely limit the potential visitor numbers of an attraction. Other accessibility issues include the suitability of access routes for coaches, the availability of car parking, and signposting, to make the attraction easy to find. For most attractions rail links are of only minor importance as rail travel is relatively little used for attraction visits.

Variety is also added at many successful attractions through special events which are often designed to encourage repeat visits or attract people interested in the theme of the event, who may not otherwise visit the attraction. To be successful, however, they must not be in conflict with the main theme or market of the attraction. Visitors are increasingly seeking a high-quality environment for their day out, so there is a growing demand for cleanliness and an aesthetically pleasing environment at attractions. Customers are beginning to reject attractions which are not kept clean, where vandalism and graffiti is allowed to take hold, and where there is a general air of neglect. Visitors are also demanding, and rewarding with their custom, good customer service at attractions. The attitude of staff and their competence is of great importance. It is important to ensure, therefore, that staff who come into contact with visitors are enthusiastic, motivated and well trained. This is a major challenge in an industry where salaries are not high and much of the labour comprises seasonal, casual staff.

The final important point about the product in this brief discussion is price. There is evidence to suggest that it is not the price charged for admission to an attraction which affects its success but whether the visitors feel they have received value for money. Whether or not visitors perceive an attraction to offer value for money depends on:

1 the amount of time spent on site
2 the quality of environment, service and facilities
3 the variety of on-site attractions.

Pricing policies that are not appreciated by customers often include the lack of family tickets, extra charges for car parking and charging separately for on-site attractions rather than offering an
all-inclusive ticket that gives unlimited use of all on-site attractions. It is important to recognize, however, that one of the things that influences a customer’s judgment of whether or not the visit has been good value for money are outside the control of operators. Such factors include the cost of traveling to and from the site, visitors’ expectations and the weather.

The market
Possibly the most important factor in the success of attractions in relation to the customer is to ensure that the attraction is targeting markets which are growth markets. A few examples of growth markets and changes in consumer tastes are outlined below to illustrate this point:
1 growth in the older age groups, who increasingly have disposable income as well as leisure time
2 a desire among many people to use their visit to an attraction to learn something new, whether it be learning a skill or gaining knowledge
3 the wish of many people to participate or become actively involved at the attraction, for example, making a pot of one’s own as well as, or instead of, watching a potter make a pot
4 a desire among families to find attractions offering something for children to do
5 the growing interest in green issues and healthy lifestyles
6 the interest in ‘leisure’, rather than utilitarian, shopping.

Successful attractions will generally be those which tap into these growth markets and consumer behaviour trends. It is also important to ensure that existing customers are satisfied with their visit as they will give positive word-of-mouth recommendations about it to friends and relatives. A survey showed that for 68 per cent of people in the UK, such recommendations were a very important consideration in their decision to visit an attraction. That is why the quality of the product offered is so important to the long-term success of the attraction.

The management of the attraction
Successful attractions tend to be those which are effectively managed. Some of the ways in which good management benefits attractions are discussed briefly below. It is important that attractions have experienced professional managers across all aspects of the operation. Attractions without such management are often weak in one or more areas, including marketing, financial control, the management of people and strategic planning the most crucial aspect of attraction management, and often one of the most ignored, is marketing. Successful attractions are usually those which have a systematic, professional approach to marketing, which is characterized by factors such as:
1 giving adequate attention to market research so that they know their market and its tastes and preferences
2 recognizing that marketing is not just about producing brochures and placing advertisements
3 taking a longer-term strategic view rather than just a short-term tactical approach
4 appreciating that there is not one big ‘public’ but lots of different market segments with different needs and desires
5 spending a significant proportion of turnover on marketing year in, year out, rather than just spending money on an adhoc basis in response to crises
6 accepting the importance of word-of-mouth recommendation and acknowledging the value of giving the existing visitor a first rate experience to encourage positive recommendations
7 employing specialist sales and marketing staff while training all staff to realize that they are also part of the marketing effort because to the customer they are all part of the core product

Strongly related to marketing is the ability of good attraction managers to respond faster and more effectively than competitors to changes in the business environment. These changes could be as diverse as technological developments, the state of the economy, new laws or changing consumer tastes, but they all have one thing in common: they are all potential opportunities or threats for the attraction and the response of attraction managers will determine whether they will ultimately be an
opportunity or a threat. Responding positively to the business environment requires good environmental scanning on a systematic and objective basis.

Following on from the last two factors is the related subject of competitors. Successful attractions tend to be those which identify their competitors and set out to achieve competitive advantage over them, attractions that are leaders rather than followers. This is easier said than done as many operators, particularly in the public sector, do not believe they are in competition with anyone. While this is not correct, it is true that it is sometimes difficult to identify the competitor for some attractions. Sometimes they can be different types of attraction or even totally different types of activity altogether. As well as looking outwards towards competitors, most successful attractions also monitor their own performance on a regular basis to allow them to make continuous improvements. These improvements must include the quality of the product they offer, the way they operate, and how they market themselves. Finally, in a fast-changing market such as the visitor attraction market it is vital that attractions are always anticipating market changes and planning for the future. It is all too easy to become obsessed with the present and operate ‘crisis management’. To be successful in the long term, attractions need to have a clear vision of where they want to be in five or ten years’ time and know how they are going to get there.

Summary

There is no guarantee of success for an attraction that follows any set of principles. Furthermore, as well as all these tangible factors there is no doubt that many successful attractions also have something special, an intangible ‘agic’ about them which is impossible to create artificially. Nevertheless, it is more likely to be present at attractions which are professionally managed and are based on an innovative concept.

References


